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People of God Today**

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Abstract: The preached word is the means that God has ordained for both the evangelization of the nations and for the building up of the church. As evangelicals, we are committed to the fact that all of scripture is inspired and profitable for the people of God: therefore, all scripture must be preached—including the Psalms.¹ In Part I, I present four recommendations for preaching Psalm 46 today. Each of these recommendations supplement the preacher’s regular homiletic preparation. These recommendations are intended to remind preachers of certain features of the Psalms in general and of this psalm in particular. In Part II, I present an example sermon, considering each of these guidelines.

Key Words: Psalms, preaching the Psalms, Martin Luther, Reformation preaching

PART I: PREACHING PSALM 46

Recommendation 1: Capitalize on the Interpretive History

A recurring challenge preachers face in today’s context concerns the relevance of the Bible’s message which can no longer be assumed; the perceived disjunction between the message of the Old Testament and the needs of the Christian today is even more pronounced. It does not take too long to realize that for many churches and many Christians, the Old Testament is foreign soil, difficult to navigate and often considered fruitless.

There are many ways to address this problem, but one solution focuses on the ways God has used these texts in the past. In the case of Psalm 46, one need look no further than Martin Luther’s reliance upon it in writing, “A Mighty Fortress.” Sadly, perhaps more people today in evangelical churches have been encouraged and strengthened through indirect contact with Psalm 46 by singing “A Mighty Fortress” than through careful and direct contact with the psalm through its being read and preached.

This familiarity with the hymn is something that should not be ignored in the preaching of the psalm. Instead it should be leveraged in the service of drawing listeners’ attention to the importance of the psalm’s message. The wise preacher

1. 2 Timothy 3:16.

ought to make the case for studying the psalm closely by noting how much positive influence it has had and continues to have in the lives of faithful Christians through the hymn, even upon those who do not know its origin, or the details of the text upon which it is based. Preaching this psalm needs to begin with showing the importance of it to the Church today, and Luther's hymn—and perhaps other important matters in its interpretive history—should be used to this end.

Building upon this, the beginning of the sermon might be the most effective place to cite the ways in which Luther's life was filled with immense troubles and challenges. Luther certainly understood the pressures of life and ministry. He knew what it was to have a family, manage difficult financial burdens, suffer physically, and lose friends to desertion and death. Just as a personal testimony about the importance of a text of scripture often awakens in us the desire to study it for ourselves, so the wide influence of this psalm—mediated through Luther's employment of it in his famous hymn—can serve to awaken listeners to their own need to hear this psalm preached.

The encouragement Luther received from the Psalms in general is also worth noting when proclaiming this text. In 1513–1515, Luther began his lectures on the Psalms. This task changed not only his view of God and His Messiah, but it also altered his view of the Christian life. Later, Luther pointed people to the example of David, who cries out for understanding, meditates on the Word, and then sings and says and prays it himself.² Luther's devotional life is shaped by the Psalms. In a letter to his friend, Peter the Barber, Luther says this about his prayer life:

First, when I feel I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other tasks or thoughts...*I take my little psalter*, hurry to my room, or, if it be the day or hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled, and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself and word-for-word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul or some psalms, just as a child might do.³

Preachers ought not to shy away from appeals to the effects beauty created by the familiar hymn, which, depending on the congregation, may have had a powerful influence on the lives of hearers; and they ought to utilize and not ignore the great testimony of Christians in the past for whom this psalm has provided special encouragement.

2. Carl R. Trueman, *Luther and the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 118–19.

3. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vols 1–55, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress; St Louis: Concordia, 1955), 43:193; (italics mine).

Recommendation #2: Highlight the Context (Both Canonical and Historical)

Canonical Context

One of the significant developments of the past few decades in the study of the Psalms is the attention being paid to the canonical context of individual psalms within the psalter. Since at least 1985, with the publication of Gerald H. Wilson's *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, scholars and some pastors have begun to consider the structure and message of the psalter holistically.⁴ The placement of each individual psalm is set within the matrix of the psalter's progression of thought and theology.

Along these lines, it is worth noting that Psalm 46, as part of Book II of the psalter, falls into a sub-section of Davidic psalms. McCann identifies the presence of the "Korah Psalms" (42–49) as a "seeming interruption of a sequence of Davidic Psalms . . ." ⁵ He notes that both Book II and Book III begin with "songs," and that both Psalm 42 (at the beginning of Book II) and Psalm 73 (which begins Book III) offer complaints about the absence of the Temple (Book II) and of God's favor (Book III).⁶ This theme of loss or absence—perhaps of exile—seems to permeate Books II-III. The division between Book II and Book III in the psalter, despite the overall similarity of their orientation, may be explained by the Davidic seams between the books. McCann, drawing on Wilson, writes:

The division of Psalms 42–89 into Books II and III would also have enhanced a Davidic orientation, because it created the situation in which both books end with a royal psalm. As Wilson points out, this means that royal psalms appear at noticeable seams of Books I-III. Plus, Psalms 2 and 89 form an envelope-structure for Books I-III, *calling particular attention to the sharp contrast between the Davidic king in Psalm 2, who is promised world-encompassing authority (vv. 9–11), and the king in Psalm 89, who has been rejected and poignantly laments, questions, and pleads for divine help (vv. 39–54[38–53]). It is precisely this contrast which begs for a response, which comes in Books IV-V.*⁷

Since much of this is subject to debate, and in any case, requires a level of intra-psalter detail to which sermons are not well-suited, I am *not* advising that this appear as such in preaching Psalm 46. But the canonical context of Psalm 46 *should*

4. See Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). See also: Daniel Owens, "The Concept of Canon in Psalms Interpretation." *Trinity Journal* 34 NS (2013): 155–169; J. Clinton McCann Jr., ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 159 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

5. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: Psalms in Their Literary Context." *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed., William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014, 350–362), 355.

6. *Ibid.*, 355.

7. *Ibid.*, 356 (italics mine).

remind the preacher to emphasize the pleading notion of the psalm. It is a psalm about trouble, and it is set within the context of other psalms that accentuate loss, absence, and difficulty. The congregation needs to see Psalm 46 as a psalm that both sets their expectations for life (trouble and a sense of absence) and speaks to them with genuine and substantive words of comfort. Congregations also need to be reminded that this psalm of trouble is not an outlier, an interruption in the otherwise smooth experience of the people of God; it is part of a larger pattern within the psalter.

Historical Context

Individual psalms often contain superscriptions connecting them to specific people or events. There is considerable debate about the exact meaning of each superscription. For instance, questions have been raised about whether דָּוִד דָּבָר demands that we understand the Psalm to have been written by David's own hand, or whether perhaps this psalm is merely about David. Similarly, the question of the individual psalm's relationship to events described in the superscription has been debated.⁸

In the case of Psalm 46, the superscription is significant for the preacher, not because it identifies the psalm with a particular historical figure or event, but precisely because it does not. This feature of psalm's context will be especially relevant when we begin to examine its setting as a song.

Recommendation #3: Underscore the Musical Nature of the Psalm

The difficulties of analyzing music along with a text have been recognized and accounted for in sophisticated ways outside of the discipline of biblical studies and homiletics. For musicologists, the seminal article describing the challenge was published in 1992 by V. Kofi Agawu.⁹ Agawu takes his fellow musicologists to task for ignoring the actual elements of the song in their analysis of 19th century German music. His initial observation about musical analysis has implications for our understanding and preaching of the psalter: "The marginalization of song *as song* in the literature speaks to a very real problem, namely, how to account for the syntax of a genre that includes two nominal semiotic systems, music and language."¹⁰ In other words, those who are analyzing something that was originally sung or played cannot ignore the musical meaning and give their attention only to the text.

8. For the wide range of views on this matter, see, for instance, S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Cleveland: The Word Publishing [reprint] 1956), 378; Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 1:740; Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning* (NY: Alba House, 1974), 16–17; George R. Berry, "The Titles of the Psalms," *JBL* 33 (1914): 199; Brevard Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16 (Autumn, 1971): 143; Elieser Somovic, "Toward and Understanding of the Formation of Historical Titles in the Book of Psalms," *ZAW* 91 (1979): 380.

9. Kofi Agawu, "Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century 'Lied.'" *Music Analysis*, Vol 11, No. 1 (March, 1992): 3–36.

10. *Ibid.*, 2 (emphasis original).

Yet, for a variety of reasons (not least that the music is lost to us today), this is precisely what contemporary preachers are forced to do when it comes to the Psalms. Psalm 46 is a perfect example of this reality. Its superscription includes at least four distinct statements which designate it as a musical work: לְמַנְצֵחַ (To the choirmaster); לְבָנֵי־קֹרַח (of the Sons of Korah); עַל־עֲלָמוֹת (According to Alamoth); and שִׁיר (A Song). Further, while the precise musical meaning of the term, “Selah” is far from certain, it does appear to have some kind of musical or performative meaning. Some have suggested that it represents a pause in the song; others have suggested a kind of crescendo effect.¹¹ In any case, it reinforces the fact established by the superscription: Psalm 46 is a different kind of text. It is poetic, as are all the psalms and most of the other biblical wisdom texts. But it is also meant to be sung.

Which leads us to Agawu’s central concern. How can we understand and communicate both the music and the language of the psalm effectively? Should that even be our objective? Even if we conclude that we *should* somehow communicate the message and impact of the musical elements of Psalm 46 and other psalms like it, the fact remains that, unlike the 19th century German “*lied*” tradition which concerns Agawu, we do not actually have traditions, recordings, or even reliably firm understandings of the notations related to the music of the psalms.¹² As preachers today, we cannot work with information we are not given. While we should remind our hearers that these were originally sung (especially when the superscription points us so clearly in that direction), we cannot speak to the meaning or force that would be conveyed by the music. This is not available to us.

As evangelical interpreters, we might also raise the question of whether or not this “semiotic system” contained in the music is significant anyway. Our formulations for the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture extend to the words of scripture, but not to any performative elements associated with those words. To think of it another way, we can have little doubt that the effect of certain biblical sermons or prayers would have been dramatic and striking, but the drama and effect associated with hearing those sermons or prayers is not what the Bible communicates to us; rather we are given the words. We must conclude that the *words* of scripture are the essential, God-breathed element, sufficient for our life and growth in godliness.

Notwithstanding all this, the musical nature of many of the psalms in general and of Psalm 46 in particular does remind us of several key elements we must bear in mind when preaching. Three particular points stand out. First, we ought to draw our listeners’ attention to these genre questions, if for no other reason than that they are emphasized for us in the (inspired and authoritative) superscription. If the words are what the Lord has given to us, then even the words regarding genre and original reception are highly significant and ought not be ignored. As evangelical expositors,

11. Norman H. Snaith. “Selah.” *Vetus Testamentum* 2 (1952): 43–56. See also, C. Hassell Bullock, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1–72*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 26.

12. C. Hassell Bullock, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1–72* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 246.

our commitment to the verbal and plenary inspiration of the text needs to be shown even in our handling of the seemingly mundane or even inscrutable details of the superscriptions.

Second, it is also worth reinforcing that, to the extent we not only preach but also give some leadership and oversight to the public worship of a congregation, the singing of these psalms is an important way to press the words themselves home. Our protestant heritage placed a great deal of emphasis on this important fact. The work of many pastors in the past in setting the psalms in metric form and with accompanying tunes can and should play a greater role in the lives of God's people today. Their re-introduction into the mainstream of evangelical public worship would go a long way to re-establishing the Psalms in the hearts and minds of today's Christians.

But lastly, the musical nature needs to be highlighted precisely because it reminds us of the essentially universal nature of the subject of this psalm among God's people. If this is a song to be sung by all of God's people, then it must apply to all God's people. This can be a reminder to the congregation that God does not promise his people an easy life, nor does he encourage them to gloss over or turn aside from the significant difficulties of following him as covenant people. Instead, the LORD places the theme of suffering at the center of the songs of his people.

Also, as noted in the previous section, Psalm 46, while identified as a song of the Sons of Korah, is *not* connected to a particular event. In that sense, this Psalm stands apart from any one particular circumstance, and is, in a way, given immediate universal application to *all* of God's people corporately as a song. The lack of historical referents in the superscription should actually be driven home. This psalm and its setting in times of trouble is assumed to be a universally applicable theme—a song for everyone to sing. Since this psalm, dealing as it does with trouble, is given to everyone to sing, it reminds us that the trouble and suffering which it assumes is also a reality for everyone. This can be a great comfort, since all Christians do experience suffering.

It may be that our lack of attention to this feature of the Psalms in their performative state is symptomatic of our general failure to adequately address the difficulties of life. Trueman writes:

In the psalms, God has given the church a language which allows it to express even the deepest agonies of the human soul in the context of worship. Does our contemporary language of worship reflect the horizon of expectation regarding the believer's experience which the psalter proposes as normative? If not, why not? Is it because the comfortable values of Western middle-class consumerism have silently infiltrated the church and made us consider such cries irrelevant, embarrassing, and signs of abject failure?¹³

13. Carl R. Trueman, "What Can Miserable Christians Sing?" from *The Wages of Sin: Critical Writings on Historical and Contemporary Evangelicalism* (Edinburgh: Christian Focus, 2004) 159.

It is certainly the case that Psalm 46, by expressing a range of problems and struggles, prepares the people of God for the actual realities of life. The fact that Psalm 46, a psalm set in the context of trouble, is explicitly a song to be sung by all, and is placed among many other songs which highlight the suffering of God's people, underscores the extent to which the cry of trouble should be the expected norm, and not the embarrassing exception.

Recommendation #4: Attend to the Poetry of the Psalm (Especially Its Imagery)

Interpreting poetry in any language can be a challenge. The relationship between the form of the poetry and the basic meaning created by the words is what makes poetry so special; but it also makes it hard to pin down. Since poetry expresses things beyond that which concrete language conveys, it often defies easy interpretation, relying as it does on the impressions its artistry creates and the array of images it generally employs.¹⁴

Ancient Hebrew poetry differs from modern English poetry in substantial ways. Many have noted that the presence of parallelism and imagery seems to have a significant formal role in the makeup of Hebrew poetry.¹⁵ But this alone does not capture its essence. There is a terseness to the language of Hebrew poetry, and there seem to be other distinguishing features in its use of matching line-lengths and in its elevated use of imagery, though even these are highly disputed.¹⁶

Notwithstanding how one navigates these scholarly debates, there still remains the very difficult question of how all of this affects preaching poetry.¹⁷ Are these features (however many or few they may be) of poetry simply obstacles to be overcome in the search for the real meaning? Are they an integral part of the meaning itself? How are they to be implemented as part of the preacher's presentation?

If poetic form itself conveys deep meaning, or if it at least amplifies the surface level meaning of a given text, how should the preacher present this? One possibility is that preachers themselves should attempt to present the material in some kind of poetic form or use the psalm itself in some kind of congregational prayer as a supplement to the sermon in order to drive home the cumulative meaning of the

14. For an interesting summary of the peculiarities of interpreting poetry in English, see Edward Hirsch, "How to Read a Poem." Available online at <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/how-read-poem-0>.

15. See for instance Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 24–25.

16. The most articulate and important work questioning the idea of Hebrew poetry is James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale, 1981), 59.

17. Preachers ought to familiarize themselves with these conventions, but this is where listening to modern preachers preach poetic—or even apocalyptic—sections of scripture will be particularly useful.

poem.¹⁸ While incorporating the psalm into some kind of responsive congregational prayer has considerable merit, and has been used to great effect in churches of the past, it is not the same thing as preaching.¹⁹ Further, the notion that preaching would itself incorporate poetic forms is problematic: both the forms employed and the skill with which the preacher could employ them would detract and distance the hearer from the original Hebrew poetry.

This can be a great loss. John Calvin quite famously called the Psalms, “an Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul.”²⁰ Surely this refers not only to the material covered by the psalms, but also the way in which the psalms, in their artistry, engage the whole person. They do this through use of artistic forms, but also through imagery.

The imagery of Psalm 46 cannot be overlooked, though this too presents challenges. Futato points out some of these. As an example of a way in which biblical imagery may work differently in a contemporary western context, Futato cites the reference in Psalm 23:5 to oil:

For most of us “oil” brings to mind either cooking oil or motor oil. Few of us will immediately smell the fragrance of a perfumed body lotion. And how many of us feel the refreshment that the ancients would have felt, knowing that anointing with oil in this context is analogous to “washing up” after a long trip to partake of a holiday meal?²¹

Again, Futato comments on the degree of imagery used in the Psalms and in the difficulties of interpreting it well:

Thus, we see with varying amounts of clarity the images presented in different psalms. In some psalms, we clearly see images. In others we see, but without the clarity of the ancients. In still others we see images as if looking through a window of opaque glass blocks.²²

When preaching the Psalms, certain features of the poetry will inevitably be lost to our hearers and probably to us as well, but the imagery must be attended to in preaching Psalm 46. The most obvious place where this attention to imagery pays off in Psalm 46 is in the transition from stanza 1 (vv. 1–3) to stanza 2 (vv. 4–7). Here we are confronted by contrasting but related images. In verse 3, we have the image of waves crashing over us and mountains trembling, but in verse 4, there is a radical shift. In the second section, verses 4–7, the Psalmist turns our attention away from

18. James. L. Mays, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* (Louisville: WJK, 2006), 4.

19. For a wonderful historical example of the use of the Psalms for congregational prayer, see Hughes Oliphant Old, “Daily Prayer in the Reformed Church of Strasbourg, 1525–1530,” *Worship*, vol 52, no. 2 (March, 1978): 121–138.

20. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint), xxxvii.

21. Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 43.

22. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

the crashing waves of our circumstances. He takes us on a little journey; he gives us a little glimpse of heaven, of God's holy city. And the image at the beginning is the key to seeing this. Verse 4 begins with a kind of exclamation: "A river!" It is the first word in Hebrew. Our translations turn it to a bare informational statement, "There is a river..." But the Hebrew text begins by saying: "A river!" For the readers and hearers of this text, though the world is falling apart, though the unthinkable may happen, though the waves are crashing in, just then the writer points to—"a river!" And the river makes God's city glad.

There are obvious references to Genesis 1–2. When the Garden of Eden is described, it is a well-watered place, with rivers coming into and out of it.²³ When the temple is described in Ezekiel 40–48, there is a river coming out of it.²⁴ In Revelation 22, the angel of God shows John the new heavens and new earth and it starts with a river.²⁵ This image, especially if it is presented with all its biblical resonances, carries with it a great deal of meaning and significance. It points us toward a shift in the author's thinking, away from trouble and to the realities of heaven.

The first stanza (vv. 1–3) also employs vivid imagery to explain the depth of the trouble. We can see this especially in the language of verses 2–3. "We will not fear though the *earth gives way*..." Today, we say that events are "ground-breaking," or "earth-shattering." That means they are life-altering. Nothing will ever be the same again. Driving home these images and identifying them with images in use today can serve to reinforce the gravity of the psalmist's expression.

These first stanza images take on special significance when we consider how they or similar images are used elsewhere in the Bible. In Psalm 104, the psalmist uses a very similar phrase and yet declares it will *not* happen to the earth: "[God] set the earth on its foundations, *so that it should never be moved* [italics mine]."²⁶ The similarity of the image of solidity in Psalm 104 ("the earth is set in its foundations") and the cataclysmic reality of the trouble in Psalm 46 ("the earth gives way") reminds us of how serious the trouble is that the psalmist considers, and, by extension, how serious the trouble is that the people of God are supposed to expect and to sing about.

And the reason he can acknowledge all of this may be accentuated by the use of the imagery of verse 3 in Isaiah 54:9–11, which reads:

9 "This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. 10 For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

23. Genesis 2:10–14.

24. Ezekiel 47:1–12.

25. Revelation 22:1

26. Psalm 104:5 (emphasis added).

11 “O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires.

God’s compassion, his steadfast love, his help in trouble is more solid than the mountains. Even if the unthinkable is happening, God is a refuge.

Similarly, in vv. 8b-9, the writer employs a succession of images and phrases designed to remind us of key events in biblical history. Drawing attention to these images, as well as unfolding them to our listeners will greatly enhance our efforts at preaching this text effectively.²⁷

Conclusion

Preaching the psalms is vital for the church in every age. Psalm 46, with its rich history of usage within the church and its important message to people in the midst of suffering, needs to be proclaimed. When preaching the psalm, we dare not ignore its history of interpretation, all the while bearing in mind its canonical and historical context; we must remember that it was originally sung congregationally by all the people of God; and, perhaps most importantly, we must analyze and proclaim it as poetry, even if the force of this cannot be brought home in exactly the same way the text itself does. It is a song of trouble for our troubled times.

PART II: PSALM 46 PREACHED

This Psalm is the source of one of the most famous hymns in Christian history. We know the hymn was written by Martin Luther in the 1520’s. There are a number of stories related to its first singing; some are dramatic but probably false. Similarly, the original context of the actual hymn of Psalm 46 is slightly unclear. But it is a hymn. The superscription makes this very clear. It is for the choirmaster. And it says, “A Song.” It also contains what are probably musical breaks of some kind which say, “Selah,” after verse 3, 7, and 11. We do not know if those were a signal to replay the chorus or the bridge; some have suggested that they are meant to tell us to pause and reflect on what we have just read, heard or sung. But they are breaks and they help us navigate the overall movement of the Psalm. We need to pay careful attention to these breaks, even if we do not know exactly what they meant musically. They signal a new section of the Psalm. This Psalm has three parts to it, each one adding its own distinctive emphasis.

But just like Luther’s first singing of “A Mighty Fortress,” with its many verses, so this three-verse song has a mysterious origin. We do not know exactly when it was composed or what the context was for its writing.

27. Compare, for instance, Psalm 46:10 and Exodus 14:13.

In a sense, that is not a bad thing. There is something timeless about this Psalm, something that makes it appropriate to any number of situations that God's people have faced and do face on a regular basis. It was not written for just one person's circumstance, but it was something worshippers in Israel were *all* to sing together. It is a universal message, and it reflects realities that every believer, in every age, must face head-on. And perhaps surprisingly, this universal message—sung by God's people throughout history—is a message about trouble.

I wonder what you are facing today. Does it feel like your life is falling apart? Can you identify with the idea of “trouble” in the first verse? We may not know the exact circumstances of this Psalmist when he was writing or of Luther when he was paraphrasing—just as I do not know your exact circumstances today; but the Psalm begins by reminding us that God is a help in trouble. But the Psalm is not just about trouble; it's about trouble that is literally earth-shattering.

You probably have people in your life who share their burdens with you from time to time. And some people have an amazing ability to make their burdens seem like huge burdens. “My life is full of difficulties. Can you believe that last night, I was out at a restaurant and I ordered the steak and I had to send it back twice because it was too rare!” And the friend goes on and on and on and you are sitting there thinking, “I do not know how I am going to pay the rent this month! I just got a huge car bill! My son is struggling with an addiction! And I have to listen to you make yourself out to be a martyr because your dinner at the steakhouse was not cooked properly!” Or maybe you have even found yourself on the other end of that conversation. Someone asks you about your day and you go on and on about something trivial. Then when you finally come up for air and ask them about their life, you find out they have cancer, or their daughter was in a car accident.

I remember one incident like this. When I was in seminary, one of my classmates was older than the rest of us. He was in the midst of a successful and lucrative career, and to his credit, he took time out to study God's Word. I was with him in a Greek class that met for four hours in the evening. Because it was such a long class, there was a twenty-minute break in the middle, during which he would take a few of us out for coffee. We always drove in his car, since he had a brand-new BMW 700 series sedan. One day, he came into class looking absolutely dejected. Something was wrong, so I asked him what the trouble was. “Oh,” he said, “it is really awful. My 7 series is in the shop and the dealer only had a new 5 series for me to borrow.” That was the trouble! We were trying to pay the bills and find gas money and he was troubled about having to drive a smaller BMW for a day! You see, there is trouble, and then there is TROUBLE. And the Psalmist wants us to know that when he speaks about God's help in trouble, he is not just talking about small or minor trouble. God is a help in TROUBLE.

We can see this by looking at the language of verses 2–3. “We will not fear though the earth gives way...” This is big language. In fact, we use it as a kind of metaphor

even today. We say that events are “ground-breaking,” or “earth-shattering.” That means huge. Nothing will ever be the same again. Can you imagine an event like that in your life? Maybe you do not have to imagine.

- You have buried a family member, and nothing will ever be the same.
- You have gotten the diagnosis, and you know you will never be able to do the things you used to do.
- You have had someone break your trust, and you forgive them, but it will never be like it was.

God is a help—even, and perhaps especially—in trouble like that.

You know, the amazing thing about this language in verse 2 is that if you turn to Psalm 104, the Psalmist there uses the same type phrase and says it will *not* happen to the earth: “[God] set the earth on its foundations, *so that it should never be moved.*”²⁸ And of course that is true. It is one of the glorious promises God made to Noah—the earth would endure until the final judgment. But it is as if the writer of Psalm 46 is saying, “Even if the unthinkable happens. Even if the earth gives way. We will not fear.”

And the reason he can say this is because our lives are resting on something more solid than the earth and the mountains. You know, in Isaiah 54, God talks about the mountains moving for his people. Here is what he says:

For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the LORD, your Redeemer. “This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you. “O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires.

God’s compassion, his steadfast love, is a very present help to us. It keeps us from fearing. It is more solid than the mountains. It is safer than the safest investment. It is more reliable than your closest friend. When all of life is falling apart, when the unthinkable is happening, God is our refuge.

In the second section, verses 4–7, the Psalmist turns our attention away from the crashing waves of our circumstances. He takes us on a little journey; he gives us a little glimpse of heaven, of God’s holy city. Remember what Paul says to the Philippians: “Your citizenship is in heaven.” Well, the Old Testament way for the Psalmist to say that is to say, “You belong in God’s holy city.” It is amazing how

28. Psalm 104:2 (emphasis added).

even imaginative glimpses of heaven are intriguing to us. If you want to write a best-seller after an accident or a surgery, just tell people you caught a glimpse of heaven! There needs to be a white light, and some warm feeling of peace. Maybe mention how you ran into your dearly departed grandfather or something like that. But this is not imagination. Verse 4 actually begins with a kind of exclamation: “A river!” It is the first word in Hebrew. Our translations turn it a kind of informational statement, “There is a river...” But the Hebrew text begins by saying: “A river!” The world is falling apart, the unthinkable may happen, waves are crashing in on me, but wait, look—“a river!” And the river makes God’s city glad.

Now if you know you are Bible, you know there are references to Genesis 1–2 here. When the Garden of Eden is described, it is a well-watered place, with rivers coming into and out of it. When the temple is described in Ezekiel 40–48, there’s a river coming out of it. In Revelation 22, the angel of God shows John the new heavens and new earth and it starts with a river.

My wife and I have been vacationing with our kids to the same place since they were born—Lake Placid, NY. And we all get excited as we get nearer and there are these landmarks: My kids are usually the most vocal: “Look—the entrance to Adirondack Park!” “The pine trees!” “The little corner grocery store in Keene Valley!” “The Olympic ski jumps!” “The bookstore!” “The boat launch!” “Whiteface Mountain!” Each of these conveys something about the place. They are markers that tell us where we are. And in Psalm 46, amid the storm, amid the chaos, when you have the unthinkable news, when things are getting worse and worse, when there is no way out—a River!

But the river is not actually the important thing. It is just the signpost. See the big thing is that God is in her midst. And look at the contrast between verse 5 and verse 2. The earth may move, but God’s city will not move. In fact, according to verse 6, nations, kingdoms, and even the earth may melt away, but it is because of God’s word from God’s city.

Do you think about this? Do you remember Jesus’ words in the great commission at the end of Matthew 28? “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...” So what should that mean? Well, first, if you have not bowed the knee to Jesus in your life, if you have not come to him and confessed your sin, asked him to cleanse you by his blood, sincerely given yourself to him, then you are simply living in rebellion against the one who alone can save you. Your strength will fail; your friends cannot help you after death; your bank account, even if it lasts, can’t go with you after death. Your legacy, your name, will die out. You have no hope for the storms of this life, or for the coming judgment, apart from Christ. He is God most high, enthroned with all power in heaven and on earth. He is the judge of the living and the dead, and he offers forgiveness for those who believe in his name.

If you are trusting in Christ, if verse 7 is true of you: “The LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress,” then I want to plead with you to turn your

eyes off the waves and up to the city with the river. Remember Peter walking out to Jesus, looking to him. When did he begin to sink? When his eyes moved from the King and Lord and to the waves. Do you pray more than you worry? Do you cast your cares upon the Lord because he cares for you? Do you boldly approach the throne of grace to find grace to help in your time of need? Approach the city of God. You may be sad and lonely and despairing, but look: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God...”

And, in a sense, I think that is what the third section of the Psalm is helping us do. Verse 8 begins with a command to look. It is a command. “Come!” “See!” “Look closely!” And what are we supposed to look at? Quite simply, look at God’s victories in the past. It is a set of interwoven allusions and echoes from throughout the Bible, a collage of scenes from God’s mighty work in the past.

Look! God flooded the earth, destroyed the wicked and saved Noah! Look! God judged Sodom and Gomorrah! Look! God rescued the people from the most powerful ancient empire, the Egyptians, by plagues and a wall of water! Look! God led his people to conquer the land! Look! God struck down Goliath! Look! God destroyed the Philistines! Look! God conquering sin and death on the cross and by the empty tomb! Look! God has worked in your life in the past!

And do you see how the Psalm ends? Verses 7 and 11 are identical. The river that leads to the city of peace and joy—well, verse 7 tells us that that God sitting on the throne of heaven is with us today. What a friend we have in Jesus! And that powerful, strong, mighty God who has won victory after victory and left enemy after enemy—including the last enemy of death—dead on the field, verse 11 tells us that that God is with us.

Do you know this God? Is this God, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, your king, your comfort, your deliverer? He will surely win.

And did you know that is what Luther wrote when he reflected on this Psalm? He knew about the one who was comforting him at his side and fighting the battle on his behalf.

Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing; Were not the right Man on our side, The Man of God’s own choosing: Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He; Lord Sabaoth His Name, From age to age the same, And He must win the battle.

Hallelujah, what a Savior!

This is the message of Psalm 46. It was its message when it was first sung by God’s people long ago. It was Luther’s understanding during the tumultuous days of the German Reformation. And it is the message God’s people need as much as ever, in our own day

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